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Giving Kids a Booster Shot

Improving food and family life starts youth out right.

We're constantly learning of new ways to give kids a head start. Good health care, stable families, good nutrition and better skills for parents are a good start. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Land-Grant universities cooperate to help families before problems need to be addressed by hospitals and court systems. What's the impact of a healthy, well-adjusted kid? An example: every low birth-weight baby costs taxpayers an average of \$60,000 in first-year hospital costs and up to \$400,000 in care costs. Educating parents offers an easy solution.

Payoff

- **Prenatal nutrition.** In **Georgia**, the DeKalb Extension Service Teenage Mothers (TAMS) Nutrition Education Program teaches pregnant and parenting teens prenatal nutrition. In one year, TAMS participants delivered 42 babies with no infant deaths. That's compared to a statewide infant death rate of 9.5 percent. Only 2 percent of participants' babies were born with low birth-weights, compared to a statewide average of 8.7 percent from 1993 to 1995. After a **West Virginia** project, 61 percent of the teens who smoked or used tobacco products stopped. Breast feeding increased by up to 45 percent in some counties. Excluding one set of twins, only 5.65 percent of the infants had low birth weights, compared to a statewide rate of 9.3 percent for babies born to teens.
- **But where's the owner's manual?** The "Babies Do Come With Instructions" program gives **Mississippi's** new and expectant parents and caregivers information on topics such as development, health, bath time, language and hearing, guidance and bonding. A survey of 63 caregivers from 18 daycare centers showed that all of them listed at least two childcare habits they changed because of the workshop. Most commonly, the participants reported changes related to bonding and exposing children to languages. Other reported habit changes pertained to safety and medical care.
- **Perfecting parental performance.** More than 200 parents have attended a series of courses on family relationships in **Ohio's** Medina County since 1997. Ninety-two percent of parents of teens and 71 percent of parents of school-age children

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said they applied new parenting techniques after attending the courses. They used discipline when it was called for, recognized positive actions of their children, solved problems by talking about solutions and showed respect for their children's opinions. One parent wrote, "We have seen a significant improvement in my ability to be more encouraging and less judgmental. The atmosphere is more relaxed and the kids, more cooperative."

- **A feast of food skills.** Many of **California's** more than 750,800 low-income families often don't have enough food. The Core Adult Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) improves dietary well-being of low-income families with young children by teaching them about nutrition, better meal planning and food buying. At the start of the program, about 1.5 percent of participants were eating the recommended diet. After the program, 7.5 percent were eating at the recommended diet level and 45 percent were eating at the minimum recommended level. About 92 percent made some positive change in eating habits. EFNEP began 30 years ago in **Alabama** when extension educators developed a program to teach and promote healthy diets among limited-resource citizens. The effort has been replicated across the country.
- **Helping parents find help.** In the **Oklahoma** "First Steps" program, volunteers meet with new parents to become friends and mentors and to provide information, support and suggestions on accessing community resources when needed. Participating families demonstrate a significant increase in child development knowledge, have their children immunized at 2 months of age and use community resources. The cost to deliver the program is about \$1,000 per family for up to six months of services. The cost to remove a child from an unsafe home and place that child in foster care is about \$15,000.
- **Read all about it.** **New Mexico State's** *Baby's First Wish* newsletter provides parenting information and resources to 13,000 New Mexico families. For the child's first 36 months, the newsletters focus on child development stages and corresponding parenting techniques. Parents reported significant gains in knowledge in child health and safety, ways to play with and teach children and ways to reduce parents' stress.

One parent wrote: "As a new parent for the last 27 months, with no family here, the newsletter answered many questions." **Wisconsin** and **North Dakota State** have similar newsletters.

- **Helping children of divorce.** **Vermont** Extension collaborated with the Vermont Family Court System to help divorcing parents work together to better meet their children's developmental needs. In 1999, more than 125 seminars reached more than 2,100 people, changing attitudes and building parenting skills for more than 85 percent of participants. A similar **Minnesota** Extension program was praised by the state's supreme court for its content and was selected to be part of Minnesota's court-ordered lessons. There are similar programs in **Arkansas, Illinois, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee** and **Washington**.
- **Focus on family.** In 1999 **New Hampshire** Extension reached nearly 1,500 adults in Family Focus classes to teach parenting techniques. By helping families before crisis occurs, the program saved the state an estimated \$242,500 in 1999 in future services needed to remedy ineffective parenting practices. About 99 percent of parents said they gained knowledge in child development, positive discipline strategies and parent-child communication. About 84 percent of parents reported they changed their parenting behavior.



**Cooperative State Research, Education,
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